

# IJC & ELT

Volume 1  
March 2014

## International Journal of Christianity & English Language Teaching

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A refereed, online journal on Christianity and ELT



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The *IJC&ELT* is also supported by the Department of Applied Linguistics and TESOL in the Cook School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University in La Mirada, California. Visit <http://cook.biola.edu/programs/linguistics-tesol/> for more information. The *IJC&ELT* gratefully acknowledges this support.

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*International Journal of Christianity and English Language Teaching*

Volume 1 (March 2014)

edited by Michael Lessard-Clouston & Xuesong (Andy) Gao

The editors extend their appreciation to all the referees who volunteered their time and expertise in reading, interacting with, and evaluating the manuscripts they received.

Typeset in Times New Roman

ISSN 2334-1866 (online)

## **Faith and Pedagogy: Five Voices from Japan**

**Paul Wicking**  
Meijo University  
Nagoya, Aichi, Japan

### **Abstract**

Despite a recent increase in research into the relationship between faith and practice in ELT, the ways in which actual Christian teachers make meaning of their faith through pedagogy remains largely unexplored. There is little empirical data about the ways in which witnessing and evangelism are (or are not) conducted through English classes. The present study is an analysis of interview data collected from five evangelical Christian teachers living and working in Japan. The participants vary considerably in age and teaching context, yet all share a strong religious faith and a desire to express it through their profession. Each participant was interviewed twice, for approximately one hour each time. The interviews were then fully transcribed and analyzed. The study found that these teachers did not make meaning of their faith and pedagogy in a way that necessitates overt evangelism in the classroom. Rather, they prefer to express their beliefs through personal virtues of love and respect, holding to a high standard of professionalism, and encouraging exploration of deeper life issues in class.

**Key words:** Christianity and ELT, EFL, faith, interview research, pedagogy

### **Introduction**

The evangelical Christian English language teacher is often caught in the midst of a complex dilemma concerning how (or whether) their faith is expressed in the classroom. On the one hand, there is much encouragement from scripture to evangelize those who do not yet know God by proclaiming the gospel message. Yet, on the other hand, it is often seen as an abuse of trust to preach the gospel to students who come to class expecting to be taught English and not to be proselytized. Although this dilemma affects great numbers of Christian teachers worldwide, there has been little empirical research concerning the way in which this dilemma is worked out in the minds of these teachers. This study aims to investigate, firstly, how some Christian teachers negotiate the tension between a desire to evangelize and a desire to follow cultural and industry guidelines that often proscribe evangelism. Secondly, the study aims to gather some insight into the practical ways in which Christian faith can inform daily pedagogical decisions.

## **Background and Theoretical Framework**

There has been no shortage of controversy surrounding the issue of religious belief in the classroom. Those who are alarmed by the association of English language teaching (ELT) with missionary endeavor raise concerns about colonialism and imperialism, as well as charges of duplicity aimed at teachers who try to convert their students (e.g., Edge, 1996, 2003, 2004; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003; Pennycook & Makoni, 2005). Others, however, applaud the positive contribution that an evangelical faith brings to the language classroom, and argue that this faith is the bedrock of excellence and professionalism for Christian language teachers (see, e.g., Byler, 2009; Griffith, 2004; Purgason, 2004; Smith & Carvill, 2000; Snow, 2001; Tennant, 2002; Wong, 2009).

At the heart of the problem is the recognition that teaching is itself a moral activity. Many scholars have argued that the teacher is a moral agent, whose decisions and actions in the classroom are unavoidably value-laden (Dewey, 1909; Johnston, 2003; Noddings, 1992; Tom, 1984). The aim of all teaching is to change students for the better, but notions of “better” and “worse”, “right” and “wrong” are essentially moral in nature.

The moral dilemma of evangelical Christianity in ELT has been explored by Varghese and Johnston (2007) in their study of teachers-in-training at two Christian colleges in the U.S. All ten participants held an essential belief that, as teachers, it was right to influence their students towards being converted. Varghese and Johnston (2007) write, “[W]e respected the strength of evangelical teachers’ religious beliefs, but at the same time, we felt that these beliefs pose a challenge to the prevailing values of the profession” (p. 13). The participants were all undergraduates and had not yet entered full-time ELT or missionary work. The present study hopes to build upon that research, in order to look at evangelical Christians who have left university and have been working as English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers for some time. Specifically, this study aims to gain an insight into two areas: (a) the lived experience of five evangelical EFL teachers in Japan; and (b) the ways in which these teachers subjectively interpret the relationship between their faith and their teaching.

The theoretical framework adopted for this study follows what Seidman (2006) terms in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing. Seidman (2006) sees interviewing not as a means to test hypotheses or evaluate ideas, but rather at the root of in-depth interviewing is “an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of

that experience” (p. 9). What I am primarily interested in is understanding how Christian EFL teachers experience, and make meaning of, the complex interactions between their faith and their pedagogical practice.

The view taken in this study is that the research interview is *social practice*, as against the idea of the interview as research instrument (Talmy, 2011). Treating the interview as social practice leads to “problematizing the assumptions that constitute it, treating interviews not as sites for the excavation of information held by respondents, but as participation in social practices” (Talmy, 2011, p. 28). As Mann (2011) argued in his review of qualitative interviews in applied linguistics, there is a need for greater recognition of the co-constructed nature of interviews, including the interactional context and the role of the interviewer. Accordingly, the interview data were analyzed not only in terms of the product of the interview, but attention was also paid to the process involved in the co-construction of meaning.

### **Study Context and Participants**

Participants in the study, all volunteers, were five full-time professional English teachers living and working in Japan. As an active approach to interviewing was taken, participants were deliberately selected who could give personal voice to experience, and who possessed horizons of meaning that were representative of the subject being studied (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). These were all evangelical Christians, with ‘evangelicalism’ being defined as “The movement in modern Christianity, transcending denominational and confessional boundaries, that emphasizes conformity to the basic tenets of the faith and a missionary outreach of compassion and urgency” (Pierard, 1984, p. 379). An evangelical Christian is someone who identifies with this movement. As such, the participants all believed that (1) there is only one God, the maker of heaven and earth; (2) this God has revealed himself through his son Jesus Christ; (3) salvation and eternal life are found in Christ alone; and therefore, (4) all Christians have a divine obligation to proclaim this truth to unbelievers.

In addition to their religious beliefs, the participants all saw themselves as career English teaching professionals. Their main source of income came from English teaching, and they located themselves within the much broader industry of ELT in Japan. The participants were selected through snowball sampling – networking through existing friendship groups and

acquaintances. They were informed of the focus of the study and were free to drop out at any time. All names used here are pseudonyms, and care has been taken to ensure anonymity.

In recognition of the co-constructed nature of interviews, it is essential to reveal my own personal background, values and beliefs. I am a professional English teacher and researcher, and also an evangelical Christian. As myself and the interviewees belong to the same group, this is a situation that has been termed cocategorical incumbency (Roulston, Baker, & Liljestrom, 2001). We have a shared interest in, and knowledge of, the topic of inquiry. We also have a shared language and vocabulary related to Christianity and ELT, which allowed the interviewees to speak freely and openly about their experiences, without feeling the need to translate their own utterances.

### **Data Collection**

Each participant was interviewed twice, with a gap of one week between the first and second interview, in order to allow for deeper processing over time. (The only exception was Jim, who, due to scheduling constraints, was interviewed twice in the one day.) Although Seidman (2006) argues for a series of three interviews, it was felt that two would be sufficient to allow participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives. Each interview lasted around 60 minutes, and was recorded and transcribed in full. An early draft of this manuscript was also sent to each participant, in order to get corrections and clarifications of the interpretation of the data. The first interview focused on putting the participant's experience in context, as well as getting the concrete details of their lives as Christians and as EFL teachers. The second interview reviewed what was said in the previous interview, and used that as a basis for the participants to make meaning of and reflect upon that experience. An interview guide was used, but this functioned more as a conversational agenda rather than a procedural directive.

### **Data Analysis**

I interviewed the participants and transcribed the data myself, which fostered an intimacy with the narratives before analysis began. I then read and re-read the texts through a process of hermeneutic phenomenological reflection (Van Manen, 1990). Firstly, a selective reading approach was used to isolate passages that seemed to be thematic of the experience of being a Christian EFL teacher. Next, a distinction between incidental and essential themes was made



through the method of free imaginative variation (Van Manen, 1990, p. 107). A number of essential themes emerged, which are presented below.

## **Results**

The five participants were each situated in a unique teaching context in Japan. For analytical purposes, they have been split into two groups: (1) school owners and (2) teaching staff. Dividing the responses in this way consciously acknowledges the fact that school owners have a lot more freedom in deciding what happens in their classrooms. The owners are three men who established and now teach in their own privately run English schools. The teaching staff are two women who are employees at mainstream educational institutions. The fact that the school owners were all men and the staff were both women was coincidental.

### ***The School Owners***

*Sketch of participants.* Walter is in his late 50s, with many years experience in ELT. In addition to running a private English school, he also develops and sells original English teaching products, and is often invited to speak at teaching seminars. Henry is in his mid-40s. He has a Master of Divinity degree and also a Master's in TESOL, and worked as a pastor of a Japanese American church in the U.S. for 15 years. Jim is in his 30s. He hasn't had any formal English teacher training, but he has a degree in International Business. His school has been operating for about 6 years.

*Outline of teaching context.* All three men own and run their own school, which means they have ultimate decision-making power over curriculum, student discipline, and everything that pertains to the EFL classroom. During the interview with Jim, he often repeated, "It's my school," carrying the implicit meaning: I can largely do what I want.

*Personal narratives of faith and pedagogy.* A common trait amongst all three school owners is that during regular class time they say they don't evangelize, they don't pray, and they don't use bibles. However, they all place strong emphasis on virtue and character.

Within Walter's classroom, one of the primary ways he expresses his faith is through discipline. He witnesses to "the truth of the order of God's creation" by imposing order in his lessons: in terms of structured lesson plans, and a definite hierarchy of teacher above the student, rather than vice-versa. He says:

There's order in the universe, there should be order in your life and in your words, in your lessons. Virtue is a beautiful thing. Education without virtue is destructive. Education without character is destructive. Not just worthless, destructive. And some will insist that I should not impose my values on my lessons. That is garbage. ...God has clear structure and order and he, if you understand that, he wants you as the teacher to convey structure and order. Therefore teach – I teach virtue, character, with humor and love and respect. ...We are each given human dignity, from God. Therefore, [that student is] precious, respect him, and he should respect you. And you should respect each other. So I don't tolerate misbehaviour. (Walter)

Walter makes a number of shifts in his narrative position in the above passage, first speaking of fundamental truths that can be universally declared, then speaking as a teacher trainer imparting advice to younger teachers, and then speaking as a teacher himself to an imagined student in his class. Walter bases his pedagogical method on absolute biblical truths as he understands them. However, Walter says these biblical truths are not promulgated in his classroom. As part of respecting students, Walter says he always gives his utmost effort in class. He mentioned that he usually finishes overtime. He goes at least 10 minutes, sometimes more, over the finishing time, as his students “need” it. Sixty minutes is not enough. He'll cut into his dinner time to give a full lesson. Also, he won't force students to listen to his beliefs. “I don't talk about my Christian faith in class, but I do say, you know, ‘I went to church last Sunday’. If they ask me, I'll say ‘Yes, I'm a Christian’.”

One recurring theme that surfaced during the interviews was Walter's relationship to the professional ELT community. He has been actively involved in strictly secular education organizations and teaching groups. However, he has been harangued and attacked by a lot of people for bringing his faith into discussions of teaching:

Well, at one time I was very active in two different – three different teacher online forums. And, every time it was constant conflict. Constant conflict. The teaching community, the EFL, particularly the EFL teaching community in Japan is, generally speaking, aggressively hostile to Christian faith. The problem was, in my experience, was that the people responsible for managing those forums were actually part of that aggressive hostility. So that, it wasn't just me standing up against the crowd, it was me being condemned by the entire association. ...Sure, you're isolated, as a Christian, as a man of faith in a godless community, but people will respect that. (Walter)

Unlike Walter, Henry has been formally trained as a pastor/missionary. He opened his school for the primary purpose of Christian mission. He partnered with a local church, which supported him for most of the rent he was paying on the school building. In fact, his school



building used to be the church building, so it has the appearance of a church from the outside, including a big red neon cross, and the words “Christ Church” clearly visible on the front. “There’s the big neon cross, which is kind of a mixed blessing. It’s easy to find, but I think it puts people off. They still think this is a church here, and because they think it’s a church they don’t really want to take an English class here. Perhaps because it’s Christian or perhaps because they have an image of what a church English class is about. So – but there’s no way to measure that.” Demonstrating a degree of narrative reflexivity, Henry first declares the reason why his school has not attracted as many students as he had hoped, but then acknowledges the difficulty in substantiating that claim.

Even though the neon cross may be off-putting, Henry sees his school’s connection with a church as being very important. “I think that a school should always be connected to a church or two. Because you ultimately want to lead [students] to a local body of Christ, so when you’re setting up the school you should probably somehow cooperate with the local churches in doing that.” The familiar use of the word ‘you’ indicates a conscious acknowledgement that the interviewer shares the same Christian and pedagogical orientations as the speaker. When Henry shares this advice, he is not speaking to a disinterested third party, but to a member of his own inner circle.

Although his primary aim is to “reach people for Christ”, Henry says he doesn’t evangelize or have any bible teaching in his classes. However, if an issue related to the Christian faith comes up naturally, he will explore that further. “Then those kind of natural opportunities I’ll take to bring in a Christian perspective, biblical teaching on something. But it has to be very natural.” The most overt way he promotes the church is by hanging posters. “The other things are concerts or Christmas parties that [the church] has, you know. I’ll advertise here. I have a display case out there, so youth centre activities, church activities, you know.” Ultimately, Henry hopes to have a positive influence on the lives of his students. The school’s catch phrase is “A better way to learn. A better way to live.” Henry says, “So it’s not just about learning English, but also learning about a better way to live, as a Christian, as God’s child. ... That’s ultimately what I hope to teach.” So when it comes to young learners, he tries his best to demonstrate the love and grace of God:

I would never get angry. Some teachers at my daughter’s elementary school are famous for yelling and getting angry. But no, right. This is a Christian school, so I represent – I guess God in some ways, to them. You know, there’s that saying, ‘You’re the only bible

some people are ever going to read.’ You know. And so, I want to conduct all my business, my life, in a way that reflects favorably on my Lord Jesus Christ. And that includes disciplining kids. So do it in a firm but loving way. (Henry)

Jim is in a similar situation to Henry. To all appearances, the two men are employed in the same occupation. Both founded an English school and teach there, both receive all their income from the school (rather than funding from a missions organization), both are linked to a local church, and both seek to lead their students to Christ. However, the two men discursively construct their identities in a diametrically opposite way. Henry sees himself as a teacher and not a missionary, while Jim asserts that he is a missionary and not a teacher. Henry states, “I don’t call myself a missionary ... I’m a professional English teacher, with a school. And so I’m doing what I hope any Christian worker would do anywhere in the world. Which is, you know, share their faith with whoever they’re coming in contact with.” In contrast, Jim repeatedly asserted that he was “a missionary”, and that running an English school was merely his *modus operandi*.

We don’t use it in our ads, but when we talk with people we say it’s our mission to care about the children. We don’t hide the fact we’re missionaries. But we don’t advertise it either. I mean, we’ll put [the Christian fish symbol] on our ad, or on the website and different things. We’re pretty open about us being Christian. We’re just not religious about it. (Jim)

Yet it was clear there was a complex relationship between Jim’s self-identification as a missionary and his identity in the community as a teacher. He mentioned later that when it comes to adopting standards of practice, he rejected the way of the missionary for the way of the teacher. “I decided to take the approach of a professional, as a teacher, rather than as a missionary.” This suggests that while Jim firmly identifies himself as a missionary, he finds it expedient to adhere to the professional standards of the EFL industry.

Consequently, he doesn’t have regular bible teaching or prayer in his classes. “There has always been a common theme within [church English classes] to have a very low price, to always pray, to always have a bible study. The three together, I have found to be very difficult.” However, if a relevant cultural opportunity arises for speaking about Christ, Jim will use that.

OK, holidays come around, and I decide in my school to do the whole time period on the faith of Jesus Christ. It’s my school. I can do that. I can take the whole time period and explain the birth of Jesus Christ, and who Santa is in relation to Jesus. We did that for two lessons. (Jim)

However, on rare occasions, Jim says he openly discusses his faith during regular class time. When this happens, it's always unplanned, and he waives the class fee. He recalls a private lesson, when his student was in some distress and needed counselling.

And so, I mean there have been times that I have counselled someone, and I just crossed out the date for the private lesson, and I said, 'Nah, this one's on me. We're talking. I'm going to share my faith with you. I don't charge for this.' And so I shared the faith. I laid out how Jesus gives us strength, and how he needed that strength in his life to overcome some of these issues. And also how to help his friend. And the private lesson ended up just being me witnessing to him, and I said, 'I can't charge you for this.' The gospel is free. (Jim)

While the school owners may have such flexibility, the teaching staff participants do not.

### ***The Teaching Staff***

*Sketch of participants.* Elizabeth is around fifty years old, and has a Master's degree in TESOL with over thirty years working in the ELT profession. Currently, she's teaching English at a Christian women's university. Darlene also has a Master's in TESOL. She's in her 20s and is working now as an assistant language teacher at a state run junior high school.

*Outline of teaching context.* Both these ladies are employed by a school. Elizabeth's school is a Christian University, so there are chapel services and formal religious instruction on campus. There is a blanket prohibition on teaching any religion in state run schools, so Darlene is a lot more restricted in how she can bring her faith into the classroom.

*Personal narratives of faith and pedagogy.* One of the main ways in which Elizabeth expresses her faith is through fundraising activities. She gets involved in various different projects and enlists the help of her students. Theologically, Elizabeth stands upon the idea of "God is my boss", which is an understanding which undergirds all of her work. Even on her business cards she has the words "Colossians 3:23", which states: 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.' The following interview segment demonstrates how Elizabeth sees this as working out in practice.

**Elizabeth:** But, there are a lot of things I do that I feel is because I'm a Christian. Like I believe that God is my boss. (Laughs).

**Paul:** Yeah, yeah.

**Elizabeth:** ... So that's always at the back of my mind, that –

**Paul:** – that God is your boss, and you're working to please God.

**Elizabeth:** Absolutely. And you know, he's always there, and I've got to absolutely do my best all the time. That's at the back of my mind. Little things – even using school facilities and you know, photocopying, everything. I just keep thinking, 'This is God's.' The way I use it, you know. Often I'll think, you know, I'm teaching at another school, I need to make copies here. And I think, 'No, no. This is for this school. I'm not going to cut corners and stuff'.

Here, I (as the interviewer) interjected myself into the conversation, expressing agreement and indicating that we had a mutually familiar outlook. Elizabeth was then encouraged to elaborate, and give a concrete example of how this idea of God as “boss” worked itself out in her world of work. This idea resonated deeply with me. We both conceptualize secular employment in terms of the divine mandate to do good works and express Christian faith, which benefits the individual and society as a whole (sometimes referred to as the Protestant work ethic).

During English lessons, Elizabeth says she doesn't witness explicitly to the students or talk extensively about her faith. “At a university – I mean, although it is a [Christian] mission school, in a sense they shouldn't be surprised if we did talk about – but I think it's – it's not, I hesitate to say it's not sort of fair on them.” A number of hedging devices and false starts in this utterance suggests that Elizabeth felt some reluctance about expressing her view that explicitly bringing faith into the classroom was “not fair” to the students. Perhaps this is not yet a firm belief, or perhaps she feels that this is a contentious opinion. Elizabeth does, however, lead a bible study group. Once a week, she meets students in the university café, and they work through a bible study together. Elizabeth also uses writing tasks to stimulate reflection on deeper issues. Her university has a retreat in the summer, and also chapel services during the week. She will set writing tasks that ask students to reflect on the retreat or the chapel service. So Elizabeth's students are encouraged to think somewhat deeply about the Christian messages they're hearing, and respond in some way.

Darlene is much younger than Elizabeth. She says she never felt attracted towards the teaching profession. She seems to have been pushed into that by her circumstances. When asked whether she feels some compulsion to tell people about her faith, Darlene said, “Absolutely. I want to evangelize.” But she finds it difficult:

When I have opportunities to say things or do things that might hint towards my beliefs, I take that opportunity. Like – if a teacher, 'What did you do on Sunday?'. 'I went to church.' And even if I just say that, it may be like, oh well, if they think I'm a cool teacher, 'Oh, you go to church. What's church like?' If even I can spark an idea. But as

far as going out and handing someone a testimony and trying to talk to them, I haven't done that so much. Basically, because of the language barrier. But also because I don't feel it's my place. I don't feel it's my gift to do that. So if it becomes real to me later on that it is what I'm supposed to do, well OK. But I'm definitely going to need some guidance on how to do that. (Darlene)

Darlene was the youngest person I interviewed, and seemed to be still in the process of working out this dilemma of desiring to evangelize, and yet feeling restrained by the system and a lack of confidence in her ability to speak for Christ. The following extract expresses the heart of her dilemma:

But there's that fear. Like, I don't want to shove it down people's throats. Because I've seen people shove it down other people's throats. And it doesn't go over very well. I want – I don't feel like I'm doing enough, but I'm scared to try and push it too much. At least, in the school system I'm really apprehensive to jump out there, and, 'Hey! Do you know anything about Jesus? Do you want me to tell you about Jesus?' 'Cause, as far as I know I'm actually not allowed to do that. So, how do I integrate, how do I show the kids that I am a Christian and that the way I'm doing things is because I am a Christian? How do I make that message clear? And that part I have not gotten, I haven't figured it out or I haven't gotten to the point where I'm comfortable with it yet. And it's really, really frustrating. ...What more can I do? What should I be doing? (Darlene)

Darlene's final rhetorical question seems to have been offered as a cry for help or for guidance in navigating a path through the lived worlds of faith and pedagogy, a path that does not yet seem to have been figured out.

## **Discussion**

In their study of evangelical trainee teachers preparing to enter the ELT field, Varghese and Johnston (2007) made the following observations. Firstly, many were wrestling with the dilemma of wanting to witness (i.e., share their faith) on the one hand, yet also wanting to adhere to professional standards of conduct on the other. Secondly, a number of the participants saw witnessing as an activity that needed to be separate from teaching. The results of the present study will be discussed in light of these observations.

Firstly, Varghese and Johnston (2007) observe: "it was evident that witnessing is not a clear, cut-and-dried matter, but that each informant struggled with what it was supposed to entail" (p. 18). This could be said to hold true for Darlene, who was only a few years older than the respondents interviewed by Varghese and Johnston. She had not yet resolved her identity as

a Christian English language teacher. The other older participants, however, spoke with confidence and certainty about their ideas on evangelism and its relationship with ELT professionalism. They all agreed that explicit evangelism had no place in the classroom, but were willing to participate in evangelistic activities outside of school. Showing care and love to their students was seen as sufficient in itself as a witnessing tool. Perhaps with age and experience teachers develop a clearer sense of what constitutes professional conduct, and how their personal beliefs can be outworked legitimately within a secular organizational framework.

Secondly, Varghese and Johnston's (2007) participants believed that "seeing their teaching as part of their religious faith did not mean preaching to their students or even telling the students about their faith" (p. 21). The same can be said for the participants in the present study, somewhat surprisingly. All five participants did not regularly seek to evangelize during class time. They did not plan regular lessons with the goal of teaching Christianity, nor did they pray or use bibles or deliberately try to steer the lesson content towards spiritual matters. This is despite the fact that all the participants had a strong evangelical faith and greatly desired their students to come to know Christ. Even Henry and Jim, who have strong links with a local church and are very upfront about their religious activities, did not systematically include Christian teaching in lessons. On the infrequent occasions when Jim did share his faith, he also chose not to charge students for those lessons.

Yet that is not to say that participants never expressed their beliefs to students. To these teachers, performing their jobs with respect, honor and love was the best way they could display their belief in Christ. None of the participants tried to hide their religious convictions, and so when the subject arose as a natural part of the lesson, they would confess their faith. Such practices as enforcing discipline, showing genuine love and concern for students, putting effort into lesson planning, offering advice and counsel to those who asked for it, and designing lesson materials to encourage deeper reflection on life issues were all part of how these teachers expressed their faith through pedagogical practice.

The present age is one where notions of relativism and subjectivity reign supreme. Any person or group that claims to believe in 'objective truth' or 'absolute moral standards' may be viewed as suspicious or naïve at best, and incendiary at worst. The certainty that comes with religious belief is viewed as a threat to the prevailing order (Edge, 1996, p. 21). While Varghese and Johnston (2007) are not as alarmist as other scholars, they still maintain that the

values of evangelical Christianity put it at odds with the wider ELT community: “Although the teachers we spoke with declared their respect for other values, we would argue that part of respecting someone else’s culture involves letting them continue to hold their own spiritual values, and that to have as one’s aim (whether overt or covert) the conversion of others to one’s own beliefs is in fact inimical to the kind of multiculturalism embraced by TESOL and by its nonevangelical members” (p. 27). And yet, is this really a tenable position? Consider two extreme non-ELT examples of spiritual values: widow-burning in India and female genital mutilation in Africa. If these topics emerged as part of an English class, would it be possible to listen silently to students explain their support for such practices without trying to get them to examine those beliefs? Surely, a better approach than simply designating all values as ‘off-limits’ for dialogue is to open up our classrooms to reason and debate. As argued by Canagarajah (2009) and others, sharing our beliefs and values in an attitude of mutual respect, through constructive dialogue, begets positive social and spiritual transformation. The five teachers in this study expressed their desire to do just that.

These teachers understand that putting a bible in the hands of a student who expects an English textbook is unscrupulous. It is somewhat paradoxical that it appears from this study that a strong Christian faith is exactly what prevents strident evangelism in class. More than winning converts, the primary goal of a Christian is to become Christ-like. This involves having a sincere love for one’s neighbour (colleague or student) and pursuing growth in Christian virtues such as honesty, kindness, generosity and others. Any underhanded attempts to manipulate the classroom in order to make converts would be in violation of pursuing Christ-likeness. Added to this is the evangelical belief in God as absolute and sovereign. God is the author and perfecter of faith. Ultimately, it is God who calls people and God who grants salvation. Professional Christian EFL teachers recognize that no amount of manipulation, arguing, goading or pressuring can bring a person to faith in Christ. As such, they can address spiritual issues if they arise naturally in the lesson, without deliberately planning or carrying out a systematic strategy of evangelism.

## **Conclusion**

Much has been written and debated (with varying degrees of hostility) about the relationship between Christianity and ELT. Yet the intensity of the rhetoric has not been



matched by a similar level of empirical research. The current study is by no means an end to the debate. As only five teachers from one socio-cultural context were interviewed, results cannot be generalized to Christians working in the ELT field globally. In addition, there may be some discrepancy between how these teachers self-reported their actions, and what actually occurs in their EFL classrooms.

Possible directions for future research could include interviews with students of Christian teachers and teaching observations, which would give a more complete picture. Even so, from this study, we can see that these teachers purport to adhere to a high standard of professional conduct which I conclude does not put them at odds with the wider TESOL field, contrary to Varghese and Johnston's (2007) conclusion. The way these participants express their beliefs would arguably be similar to the way non-Christian teachers would express their beliefs, whether it be in the ideas of democracy, human rights, liberalism, or any other ideology that we all, as teachers, carry with us. Of course, we should be aware of issues of power in the classroom and be careful not to abuse that power. But when everyone, teachers and students alike, can express their beliefs with freedom and openness, our classrooms can become catalysts for positive social change. It is hoped that this article has made some progress in documenting how this is being done by one small segment in ELT.

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*Paul Wicking ([wicking@meijo-u.ac.jp](mailto:wicking@meijo-u.ac.jp)) works as a full-time lecturer at Meijo University in Nagoya, Japan. As well as faith and pedagogy, his other research interests include task based learning, assessment, and materials development. His publications have appeared in The Language Teacher and JALT conference proceedings, among others.*

